

# Doing critical ethnography and struggling around

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## Abstract

Whilst critical ethnography is an appropriate and beneficial research approach for *troubling* school policy such as *behaviour management* in large institutions like public high schools it does present some challenges and difficulties for the *lone ethnographer*. This paper traces an ‘insider’ experience as researcher and secondary school teacher as I investigate the *Behaviour Management in Schools Policy* (2001, 2008) in Western Australia through the understandings and experiences of 27 sixteen year old school students. As I unpacked many of the struggles and contradictions between what policy was claiming to do and what was really happening on the ground in student’s lives, I also found spaces and possibilities to continue my research. It is the strategies for discovering meaning from social action and analysis of data as well as experience with the ethical dilemmas of engaging in critical ethnography that I share throughout this paper.

**Key words:** ‘troubling’ behaviour management policy, ethical struggles, critical ethnography.

## Introduction

Risk incurs discomfort, it challenges not only our own positioning in the world and the conditions that we choose to inhabit, it can ontologically realign us and as individuals we can contribute to the momentum of change (Barbour 2010, 169).

In exploring dilemmas when doing educational ethnography, Barbour (2010) engages ‘with a new, more removed audience’ (169). I also take this opportunity to ‘textualise’ and ‘export’ my ethnographic experience and thoughts by outlining some of the ethical dilemmas encountered when positioning myself in a critical ethnography research thesis (Robinson 2011). In this work I interviewed a group of 16 year old high school students (14 male and 13 female) who had volunteered to share their understandings and interpretations of The Behaviour Management in Schools (BMIS) policy (2001:2008) in Western Australia. From the beginning phases of attempting ethics approval from the university, through to data generation and representation of findings within the thesis, I encountered a series of challenges and turning points. In this paper, I name some of these dilemmas as they were experienced and use extracts from my ethnographic journal to further articulate them. I then consult the advice and support from the literature that reinforces the experience as authentic and legitimate. Finally, I trace the path taken through the experience, once again via ethnographic journal and field notes to resolve each challenge as self dialogue. These ‘reflexive turns’ became a mode of transforming the situation, enabling me to evolve and continue the research journey. Frampton et al. (2006) explain that knowledge is produced through this reflexive social process as it is determined by learning together *from* and *with* others (4).

### **Why critical ethnography?**

For me critical ethnography provided both the pathway and series of movements needed to 'trouble behaviour management policy' (Robinson 2011). My values and subjectivities were able to be aligned with my educational pedagogy. I was not only observing and recording, but also thinking/reflecting and then doing something about what it was that I had seen and recorded. It freed me to move beyond description and images and then imagine what *could be*, initiating change and 'freeing individuals from domination and repression' (Anderson 1989, 249). When 'the classroom has become the test tube where the inequities of capitalistic corporate power are fermented' (Robertson 2005, 5) then critical ethnography becomes paramount in situating the research, socially, culturally, economically and historically from a standpoint that does not ignore more intuitive or subjective ways of knowing (Foley and Valenzuela 2008, 288).

### **The importance of reflexive turns**

I need to write to try and understand myself as a researcher and my reflexive and ethical positioning within the research project (My journal entry, December 2010).

Barbour (2010, 159) confirms that 'we revert to writing and the power of textual language' in times of questioning, because this is 'an attempt to resolve any uncertainties we may have'. Many reflexive turns like the journal entry above occurred as I found myself asking significant questions during the research thesis and decided that they required further exploration. These questions were related to what I was witnessing and experiencing. I was attempting to understand the phenomenon presented but also questioned what it may have been that I had chosen to reject. Barbour (2010, 168) refers to these significant moments of dilemma as 'stops'. Foley and Valenzuela (2008, 289) also validate these moments as 'intense self-other interactions' and (Noddings 1998, 159) advises that critical thinking needs these significant starting points to have a deepening of self understanding. She explains that it is these 'points at which the thinker reaches toward the living other with feeling that responds to the others' condition' (161).

During the remainder of this paper, I will share these turning points as a journey through the research process of sections of my thesis. This will be presented in narrative style and includes field notes, interview quotes and journal excerpts to tell the story. The concept of story resonates as a way of sharing student interpretations and understandings as they are the collective voices that are often marginalised and silenced in policy, especially concerning management of students own behaviour in schooling. Storytelling in this mode allows me to place these young people in the middle of the text and to be engaged therefore as 'reflective practitioners' (Guarjardo and Guarjardo 2008, 4).

When transcribing the stories I hear from those who have been there, bottling it up, waiting for someone to listen...first I wonder, then I reflect and finally I feel a sense of responsibility and squirm with unease (My journal entry, May 2008).

These *turns* require certain sensitivity to their existence. They demand recognition and confirmation from others that they are worthy of pursuit. This activist standpoint has an impact on what it is you choose to see (Frampton et al. 2006, 5) but also helps one to be focused as listeners and good observers to 'penetrate the illusions' and 'expose the reality situated beneath the obfuscation' (Cammarota 2008, 45). Smith (2005, 138) reinforces my role as ethnographer is to be 'acute, thoughtful, and probing' thus learning from the informants and the setting. These ethical struggles, or reflexive turns that I now turn to

discuss in detail include; 1) gaining ethics approval for the research, 2) opening the school gate, 3) collecting student narratives and 4) representing the *other*.

### **1) Finding approval**

I knew from the onset that investing in research including students was going to be problematic for any ethics committee because I was asking students what it was that they thought about behaviour and how it was managed in schools. Applying a critical inquiry approach into school life for 16 year olds is neither neutral nor passive so I was destined to come across challenges as I *probed* questions that provoked and unsettled the world as it is, with a view to looking at how it might be (Giroux 1983, 14). In the original ethics application, I had submitted the following kinds of questions that I had intended to ask students: *What is school like for you at the moment? What can you tell me about school rules? Have you ever been punished? What rule did you break and how did you feel?* Such questions were regarded by ethics committees, to be far too complex and ‘sensitive’ to be considered as a part of ‘normal educational activity’ for this age group (16 and 17 year olds). At this stage, subjective terms such as ‘normal’ became problematic for me and I began to question what the term meant in the context of an ethics application. I had argued in my application that the research was being ‘undertaken in the best interests of the children’ and was very clear and well versed about the ‘legal and ethical obligations to guarantee confidentiality to the subjects’, two of the checklist requirements on the form. I soon realised that an expedited ethics process, cannot by its own restriction, involve any students from schools, as the main contradiction of this process was that students were required to provide informed consent and yet were still caught up in the legal situation of being in dependent relationships.

For many students, the daily experiences of school life are indeed sensitive, intrusive and personal and for many disempowering in terms of their own identity formation. These students often spend much of their day at school both in and out of the classrooms discussing issues around their own behaviour management. A journal entry captures some of the experiences, frustrations and contradictions that I experienced at this time:

I find myself in a contradictory position as I apply for ethics approval. My aim was to be ethical to student needs, understandings and perceptions of behaviour management, yet I am being forced to indicate that I would be intruding on personal lives and initiating anxiety and restlessness. Suddenly I was instructed to declare my impact on students. I am being forced to state to students that I could not guarantee their confidentiality (Journal Entry, December 2006).

The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) had insisted that I declare intrusiveness as a component of my research. Ironically the intention of the research was to provide students with freedom of expression about behaviour management policy and its impact on their lives. The major contradiction then was that my research had deliberately set out to create spaces for students’ voices to be heard around a policy which had largely silenced them. I had been forced to construct a letter of consent that included informing consenting parents that it may not be possible for all data to be kept confidential. It was not an intention of my research to have ‘alarm bells’ aroused about situations that probably would not occur just because I was asking questions about behaviour. Eventually, however, I was able to find a way around this challenge by constructing a respectful letter to candidates which covered the ‘duty of care’ component of the research without losing the essence, critical nature and intention of my research. The process finally eventuated in me asking for student volunteers only and obtaining their approval to participate in the research as well as their parental/guardian’s consent. I had also written letters informing parents and guardians that

the students could withdraw their consent at any time during the research. This process involved five drafts of the original form and at least five attempts to the committee that the form was 'ethical' enough. Fortunately, I was able to maintain a process that remained conducive and faithful to the research methodology and my own ethical intentions as a researcher. Three months later, however, a decision was made that my research was not to be approved and that it needed to be resubmitted addressing 13 key points. One of these concerns was that it had not yet gained approval from the West Australian Department of Education and Training (WADET) even though I had already long before received approval from the school principal concerned. Procedure 2c of the Departments' policy states that the 'school needs to sight written evidence from the research institution that ethics and methodology have been vetted'. This stage of the ethics procedure became caught in a loop as I required the reciprocal approval of each institution; WADET and HREC; yet I needed to apply for both separate from each other.

## **Resolution**

Dennis (2010, 123) explains that educational ethnographers are placed in the everyday life domain where actions are simultaneous with the process itself—so ethical questions are being pondered all along not just prior to the conduct of research. She also confirms that to behave ethically in the field is 'complex and dynamic' and that the many ethical questions that emerge could never be addressed through formal institutional means anyway.

What followed for me was an onerous process of swinging to and fro between e-mails, phone calls and edited written proposals in order to have an application considered *ethical*. There were times when it would have been easier to give in and do away with researching student interpretations at all. Whilst ethics approval is very important and designed to clarify and simplify, this research approval experience, in its overzealous attempt to rationalize, had the potential instead to actually cloud enthusiasm and almost push the research proposal out of existence!

Fortunately, this did not happen. Instead, by remaining doggedly persistent and receiving the support and advice of others who had shared similar experiences, the design of my research method remained reasonably authentic to its original intentions, making the many procedural hurdles worth the determination and patience. In addition, the research interviews were conducted very soon after final ethics approval was granted, making the remainder of the research data process relatively smooth and productive. This meant that the rigour, time and persistence required getting into the school and starting the research process was not in vain. Giroux (1983, 14) explains how the challenge of obtaining ethical authority from ethics committees could be understood as being ensnared in a rational positivist discourse of a conservative and increasingly restrictive research climate. Such scientific research advances the immediate and celebrated world of 'facts' and is often protected within ethical regimes of control.

During the ethics approval process, a major learning curve was not to assume that people will understand what it was that I was planning to do, just because I did! I had to learn to make explicit any decisions made and provide minute details about every action planned. I learnt that sometimes it was better to say less than more. Ironically, on occasions, it also appeared that to be ethical in my own research that I had to work around unethical procedures to gain the access required in order to be in a position to listen to research participants. On the other hand, being in such a predicament also meant that I was forced to define my position as a researcher and continually refine my research project.

On reflection, however, the struggle experienced in gaining ethics approval provided the opportunity to search and discover creative spaces to work within the constraints of the

positivist paradigm. Similar sentiments are expressed by Simons and Usher (2000, 11) who assert that making ethical decisions is a 'process of creating, maintaining and justifying an ethical integrity that is more dependent on sensitivity to politics and people than it is on ethical principles and codes'.

## 2) Opening the gate

This is a strange week in my life. It has been full of fear and insecurity as I search for knowledge, understandings, and explanations. I have been visiting schools for field analysis and also as a supervisor for practising teachers. I have *felt* intimidated by many of the practices and the routines, the power plays that I witness. It has me questioning everything (My journal Entry, May 2006).

I was engaged in critical ethnography to find out how effectively the BMIS (Behaviour Management in Schools) policy was being implemented and to question much of the current research used to legitimate current behaviour policy prescriptions in schools (Jeffrey and Troman 2004, 546). It is no wonder then that I was being met by gatekeepers and therefore, had to expect challenges such as those revealed in the journal entry above. Nespor (1997, 205) observes that gaining access into a school is not the same thing as gaining access to the students or people working in them. My journal entry also expresses some of the frustrations in dealing with gatekeepers and other blockages that presented themselves during the research project design as I tried to get into the school and interview students.

At this reflexive stage; journaling, field notes, and discussions with colleagues at university became vital and valuable modes of working through these hurdles as I struggled to understand situations and find workable solutions to what at first seemed insurmountable. Below are further examples of how I employed these ethnographic tools to work through these challenges:

A debrief to/for myself, feeling alone....The surveillance of being an outsider trying to *come in* trying to make contact, be familiar, and make even the slightest connection. It feels like walking into a prison – the order, the control of people and their emotions (My field notes, May 2007).

Schools...looking the same...the *cyclone* buckled fences, cold concrete verandas, pockets of space to escape, demountables to hide between, break and sneak around. Leaking rooves, dilapidated furniture, lockers ripped out, drain pipes tapping and dripping (My journal entry, May 2007).

What felt so assaulting (insulting?) at the time, was the lack of respect towards me from staff as I engaged with the students about my research. I could hear the mumblings and mutterings and gasps from some of the teachers and administrators as I was briefing the students on what I was planning. It felt as if I was trying to establish a secret code and that my work should be treated with scepticism and suspicion. There were no nods of acknowledgement, no reassuring thanks or smiles, only diverted glances *away* and lots of whisperings. The students seemed in contrast, 100% attentive, (all two hundred and fifty of them) to what I had to present. I was then instructed by the heads to place the consent forms at the back of the gym. I felt frustrated having to leave them there as I was not sure if students would be in a position to collect them after I had gone. I also asked that forms be left at the Student Services office. They were abruptly snatched away, out of sight, so I knew that students then had to *ask* for them. It was as if the predictions of the sceptic administrators were being confirmed; the chants of 'NO students will just take them. Let us pick the students for you', echoed in my mind. At least I had a chance to speak to the cohort. Maybe even if I follow the schools' method of distribution, then at least there is an *awareness* of my study. Sometimes I just need to feel strong in all of

this and know where my intentions lie and where and when to ask for support. I should be prepared for this scepticism and cynicism. I am rocking some solid foundations of what is normally asked and how students are approached—so I should be brazen and confident enough to pursue it when some of these predicted resistances emerge. (My field notes of the Year 10 Assembly at Anchorage High, May 2007)

## Resolution

Rist (1981, 266) agrees that the work of researchers in the field requires some negotiation and bargaining to overcome impediments and constraints to site access as demonstrated above and once again in the following field note entry:

I am digging, digging deep. No not crawling out and away as I nearly did yesterday, but excavating the culture of the school in search of an open free space. I received an e-mail today from the Year 10 leader inviting me to interview students. She also offered me her assistance. After the struggles with ethics approval for my research, then the blocks in getting into the front office, Student Services meetings, staff meetings, through management gatekeepers and others trying to mould and carve my research into something completely alien to its intention, this e-mail was a jewel, a huge breath of fresh hope and a major cause for celebration! (Field notes, May 2007)

Denscombe (2003, 88) explains that as researchers, the meanings we attach to these events and the language we use to describe them is a process that relies on what we already know and believe. I had worked for the previous ten years in a school with a culture and a system that had felt alien to my style of teaching. So it seemed plausible that my past experience had influenced what I was observing during *the assembly* and thus may have contributed to the feeling of being blocked in my entrance as a researcher. By the time I had received reassurance from my supervisors that it was worthwhile pursuing, and advised to *look for gaps* to work between or through the challenges, I had the opportunity to remain confident and continue with my perusal of the project. For this reason, the Year 10 leader's reaction and notes were totally liberating within my research process.

## 3) Making decisions

I had interviewed the 27 student subjects in two half hour sessions, a few months apart, and then I had transcribed their notes. What I had not accounted for were the awkward decisions I had to make in relation to masses of collated data. Self searching once again occurred; for example, questions emerged such as: *What parts of student stories do I use or not use? Which parts do I report on or not report on? How will I (re)present their stories; as told or in conversation? Will I use poetry? Who will lead the conversations, me or the student or both?* My use of this personal voice assisted in demonstrating respect for and skill in the language of the students both during the fieldwork and in the final written ethnography. Foley (2002, 484) believes that it is important to foreground the people and events we are studying over the academic, theoretical commentary. McLeod (2000, p. 49), nevertheless, warns that insight into the students' lives is always going to be partial and that power relations (such as between researcher and researched) can constrain and incite particular responses. However, she also argues that no research can really claim to provide a complete and full account of the subject. What it does mean is that 'any findings drawn from interviews must be interpreted cautiously, reflexively and in relation to other interviews and research' (McLeod 2000, 49).

A further issue was my authority as researcher over the position of the student. Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000, 121) outline the methodological problem of such generational interpretation. They point out that the socialisation process is quite different (in terms of values, attitudes, beliefs and general social mores) between the researched and the researcher. Because of this 'power differential' (123) it is unlikely that young people are going to seek

adult counsel in dealing with emotional and personal issues. As they state, many adults already have problems communicating in this way with other adults! However, rather than treating young peoples' knowledge and understandings as problematic, like Hickey and Fitzclarence, (2000, 122), I argue that by interviewing students as researchers, our interest is in 'nurturing a greater sense of connectedness' as we engage in conversations with them.

From the beginning of my research, I had planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with students and then follow on by maintaining contact, developing sound relationships between the students, myself and each other. Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000, 125) also stress the importance of such 'affinity' in the process of nurturing conversation with participants. I was aware that such a quest may not be such an easy task, however, I wanted to make a conscious effort to overcome some of the structural barriers and reduce the participants fears to encourage 'ebb and flow' of conversation (125). As Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000, 125) state: 'affinity is formed around equality and camaraderie, not compliance!' I intended that the questions asked were to be relatively unstructured, non-confronting and 'grounded in the young person's experience' (Smyth et al. 2000, 24). I then decided on asking open style questions for broader or more general information, placing fewer restrictions on how the students might answer them. I had the confidence by then that the students would give me recognition as a respondent and satisfy their own communication needs; talking through their own ideas while I attentively listened. In contrast, Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000, 126) confirm that 'one of the reasons why many young people do not verbalise their problems and anxieties, or seek the counsel of older people is because they do not believe they will get a fair and considered hearing'. Thus, the use of open ended questions allowed students to discover their own priorities and frames of reference (Anderson 1990, 234) involving a process of 'externalising' their experience to make meaning (Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000, 126). By exposing general questions that would start 'purposeful conversations' (Burgess 1988) and nurturing 'open-ended discussion' (Hickey and Fitzclarence 2000, 125), I asked questions such as *how is school for you* and also began taking field notes, continually writing and critically reflecting within my ethnographic journal. These choices and actions helped to distil and crystallise events and ideas about the research process in particular, hence melding the theory within the practice of the research.

Prosser (1999) confesses to having to actively work through his own language and behaviour so as to not reinforce the authority that many students have resisted, however, as he says one 'cannot help being an adult' (176). Therefore, the best that can be done in this situation, as an adult research participant, is to be satisfied that one's genuine altruistic desires to involve students be seen as a positive act in the methodological processes of the research (176). My journal entry reflects this:

It is a lot more complex trying to put myself into the shoes of the young people that I wish to study...I know I will never be able to do that, as I could, in some respects when studying teachers lives; however, the attempt to look from the 'others' perspective feels worth something. (February 2006).

## **Resolution**

Throughout this research process, I have continually worked on the premise that one's own knowledge and thinking is rich in context and legitimate. I have also been mindful that by inviting students' own recital that I may evoke strong reactions and/or emotions. Providing the space to reflect on student opinions, views, and images was significant and needed to be monitored to reassure students that it was a safe place to share their own views. By doing this, I was able to witness the students themselves finding solace with one another because they had shared their own life stories. Meanwhile, during this process, I remained sensitive to

the emerging emotions and content of collective stories whilst creating an environment of confidentiality and safety. I was therefore able to maintain a balance of respect, honesty and keen interest in the lives of these young people. I did these things because I genuinely wanted to retain their trust in the process and my dignity as a co-researcher. Smith (2005,143) confirms that this is genuine because as she claims ‘the work of the dialogue between informant and researcher goes beyond the moment of dialogue as a moment in a social relation that catches up the informant’s experience and transforms it’ (143). My role as an ethnographer was therefore to pass from dialogue with the individual student to create a new dialogue and make ‘connections, links, hook-ups, and various forms of coordination’ that tie everything together and be ‘made visible’(143).

With this critical and conscious role in mind, combined with an ‘ethic of care’ (Noddings 1984), I planned to keep participants informed throughout the research process as well as creating a safe space for them to tell their stories around behaviour management. I wanted the research design to be inclusive and respectful of the students and those teachers that were involved. My research participants were then able to review data, and helped devise questions for discussion that had an ongoing impact on analysis and development of narratives. Watts (1993) confirms that by doing so, ethnographers come closer to incorporating into their work the ‘the patterns of belief and value and significance of the people they study than do most other social scientists’(56).

#### **4) Representing the *other***

The voices of my subjects linger in my head. But there is a void. I can no longer share or communicate with them, their life and their being. I am left with a recording and a collection of their words on my paper that I tinker and toil over (My journal entry, September 2008).

Smith (2005, 137) confirms that a ‘second dialogue supervenes’ as you ‘rediscover what was said or observed’ and this is partly because ‘the researcher knows what they are hooked into’. This can be more than was bargained for, but of course the participants do not really know what they are signing up for. So my next reflexive moment had me questioning *how I get the participant observer balance right (as an insider? /and as an outsider?)*. One of the challenges facing critical ethnographers is the task of representing the complex lives of participants. Whilst transcribing and developing narrative portraits I became uneasy about representing their lives and asked whether it was indeed possible to account for the complexity and degree of sophistication required in constructing the lives of *others*. The following journal entry begins to explain some of my reservations:

I began to develop empathy, understanding, appreciation, admiration and respect. Then what do I do with those feelings? What do they do with me? I kept reassuring the students that I could not change things entirely, but that their comments and thoughts would be contributing to research and hopefully make a change for others in the future. As *Max* (one of the student participants) put it ‘at least the kids that are in Year 8 now may notice some difference when they come to Year 10’. So being a critical ethnographer has many complications about power and relationships. It is difficult sometimes to know how much to allow yourself to represent the *other* and how much to allow yourself to *feel* knowing that you are going to have to *(un)feel* again and continue on with the research and further and other research which may or may not involve those particular participants. (Journal entry, July 2007)

It becomes clear from this entry that I started to doubt my methodology and theoretical standing and became restless about the notion of trying to represent the *other* when I was not one of them (the students). I began wondering about imbalances of status, age, experience and positions of power. Pole and Morrison 2003 and Watts 1993 enlist ethnography’s



concern with everyday events and emphasis on meaning and action to resolve such tension. They claim that the accounts from ethnography are usually insider's accounts and that the attention to detail provides the researcher with a privileged view over that of an outsider (Pole and Morrison 2003, 8; Watts 1993, 54). In revealing self, (the etic/emic), one is *being* an insider and an outsider. In this manner, my own experience of schooling as a student and as a teacher can be seen to frame my research question. The following prose, written while collecting data for this research, captures an element of this relationship and the understanding of the social structure of schooling:

I am an outsider...coming in, trying to squeeze through the fences and the gates. Climbing up and around stairs, through corridors; searching an entry point, only to find yet another barricaded door. The next key and the revealing clue discovered, carefully crafted to release a little but not too much of me and my purpose. When you are an insider you know it is a strange land, you get through by not asking too many questions. You play the games required to get you by. You try not to think too much about the absurdity of it all. So you find distractions, colours, shapes, words that dazzle and glimmer. You search songs, poems, metaphors, movies that take you away awhile. You dream and fantasize how it could be, so that the gulf between the reality and the imagined can be bridged by a traveller moving from the outside to in...and from the inside out. (My journal entry, June 2007)

Tedlock (2008, 157) also recognises this classic ethnographic dilemma and states that it is represented as a *mirror* 'promising not to lie but never telling the whole truth either'. Foley (2002) also refers to a mirror metaphor as it 'directs one's gaze at one's own experience make[ing] it possible to regard oneself as *other*. Through a constant mirroring of the self, one eventually becomes reflexive about the situated, socially constructed nature of the self, and by extension, the other' (p. 473).

### **Resolution:**

At times when being the participant observer who had stepped back inside-not quite as an outsider but on a bridge, was complicated yet an important position as an ethnographer. This is because I was able to view as one who was familiar yet remain to a degree *removed* from the situation so that I could reflect, observe and document what was happening. Taking this action may be risky, but sometimes as Barbour (2010, 168) confirms, such risks are necessary so that we can challenge and unsettle the way things are. I also draw on Smith's (2005, 36) notion of institutional ethnography to enable inquiry and discovery in the actual experience of young people in high school rather than quickly forming a conclusion. The research is then 'projected beyond the local to discover the social organization' (41). This is a standpoint that begins with this type of starting point and therefore represents what is really happening (Smith 2005, 42).

Pole and Morrison (2003, 151) explain that this form of ethical problem (in the collection and analysis of ethnographic data) is not just about being overt. It is also a 'recognition and interpretation of the ways in which your identity as male or female, outsider or insider, youthful or mature' are all consolidated. Schultz (2001) experienced something similar when recording the insights of urban adolescents:

I tell the students' stories for them. I appropriate and transform them to construct my own narratives. While I do not claim that our relationships were equal, I am interested in the ways they can be considered to be collaborative (20).

Lather (1991, 137) also attends to this issue by arguing that researchers should act less as masters of truth and justice and more as creators of space in which those directly involved

can act and speak. She also draws on Derrida's concept of 'deconstruction' (Lather 2003) to argue for textuality as praxis. She explains that:

This is a non-reductive praxis that calls out a promise, not a new concept but of practice on a shifting ground that foregrounds the limits of the fixing, locating, defining and confining that is the work of the concept. This is a praxis that can survive the critique of Marxism, praxis immanent in practices that help us think not only with but in our actions. (266)

I began to locate myself as an educational researcher being in the action doing research *on* and *with* the voices of the students that I interviewed and then transcribed and organised into selective pieces of discourse. I began to see that there was enough data to keep creating new stories, however, this was not only an attempt to unmask but also a 'keeping open, alive, loose on guard against itself' (Lather 2003, 260) the voices of the students as I attempted to interweave them in the research story. Ezzy (2002, xii) argues that by doing any qualitative research means participating in other people's lives and then writing about that participation. My field notes have demonstrated a growing awareness of the ethical dimensions of being a researcher and attending to the realities of students own dialogue. As Brown and Dobrin (2004) explain, this reflexive approach involves:

...redirecting the critical gaze of ethnography away from science and toward politics, away from the interests of the ethnographic Self and toward a concern for altering the material conditions that determine the lived reality of the Other. (3)

Noddings (1998) believes that if we are concerned with these moral outcomes then most episodes of critical thinking must start with the arousal of such feeling. She advises, therefore, to 'care about the people, causes, and problems to whom and to which we will apply our thinking skills' (63).

## **Conclusion**

As I engaged with the social world around me, everything became a question.

You challenge what you see and experience—your own position and stance, that of others and the conditions around you. This is not necessarily a comfortable place. It is one that keeps you wriggling in the seat of your research, fumbling in your own pockets of certainty and tossing and turning in and out of slumber (My journal entry, February 2009).

Collecting the voices of young people who have been invited to share their experience of codes of conduct in their school brings with it many challenges, but also many insights which for the ethnographer are real and substantive. They are our data, those words uttered, those subtle body movements, those responses to our questions posed. Yet our actions bring many ethical dilemmas and responsibilities that at times require cross examination.

In this paper, I have shared some of the challenging experiences I encountered in doing critical ethnography in educational research. This included my role and positioning as researcher throughout the research process—from data generation through to representation of findings within the thesis. It also shares how I was able to blend a narrative style alongside data that included the voices of students, field notes, journal entries and school policy statements. Most importantly, I also share the negotiation processes that occurred, working through some of these challenges to eventually find the voices of students. Ethical commitments to this work compels one to be more collaborative, less procedural and produce practical knowledge that can 'transform local communities and institutional policies' (Foley and Valenzuela 2008, 306). It was the *unearthing* of critical ethnography which enabled me to discover meaning from social action thus allowing me to bravely step inside the field of a large public secondary school. This activist paradigm in which I search and share silenced

versions of school life is precisely the kind of orientation necessary to speak back to educational policy and practice.

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